

## **MACBA surveys Coco Fusco's incisive poetics with works that question the perversity of power and address complex issues such as homeland, identity, colonialism and race**

- Balancing unflinching criticism with artistic sensitivity, Coco Fusco is the subject of the MACBA exhibition, *I Learned to Swim on Dry Land*, which runs from 23 May 2025 to 11 January 2026.
- The exhibition features around a hundred works by the US artist of Cuban descent whose artistic practice ranges from video art and performance to photography and essays.
- Cuba is central to the project, as is the United States and its immigration policies, the rise of the right wing and colonial legacies within a discourse where Fusco always prioritizes the collective.
- Fusco investigates the systems of power that traverse both the art world and contemporary thought and defends the need for institutions that allow artists to be critical of the system.
- The exhibition is curated by the museum's director, Elvira Dyangani Ose, and is developed in collaboration with El Museo del Barrio, New York, and supported by the Ford Foundation.
- Alongside the exhibition in May, MACBA will host the Cuban independent film series *Memory is a Landscape in Ruins*, curated by José Luís Aparicio.

# Coco Fusco

## I Learned to Swim on Dry Land



Born in New York in 1960, Coco Fusco has developed a multidisciplinary career that encompasses video art, performance, writing and education. With commitment and critical reflection, her work examines themes such as cultural identity, colonial power, the representation of the other and human rights, its harsh subject matter balanced with a poetic and evocative aesthetic. This characteristic equilibrium is represented in the exhibition that opens at MACBA on 22 May, entitled *I Learned to Swim on Dry Land*, the first sentence of the 1957 poetic micro-story *Natación* (Swimming) by the Cuban writer Virgilio Piñera.

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The exhibition brings together approximately one hundred pieces in diverse media, grouped into five areas: Cuba as an Empty Square; The Agency of the Other; Power and Prison, Civil Disobedience and Direct Action; and Fusco Archive. The tour offers visitors the chance to immerse themselves in the thought of one of the leading figures of art theory and criticism since the late 1980s, at a time when it has acquired additional relevance given the current change of political paradigms.

### **The Word and Cuba as an Empty Square**

The exhibition's focal points are the word, the symbolic use of silence or its imposition, and the inversion of language and the historical and present-day confrontation between artistic expression and power. A critical place here is occupied by Cuban poetry and literature, present in the different exhibition areas. The lives and imaginaries of dissident creators who have endured or are enduring repression weave an audiovisual, performative and documentary journey through post-revolutionary Cuba.

The exhibition begins with an open space, the Plaza de la Revolución, a metaphor for the unfinished promise of revolutionary Cuba. Her projects observe the consequences of the economic embargo and revise the romantic visions of the Cuban revolution that persist in Europe and the United States three decades after the end of the Cold War. Fusco has been

collaborating since the 1980s with Cuban artists, poets and filmmakers on the island and in the diaspora, focusing since the end of the Fidel Castro era in 2008 on conflicts that occur between artists and the state.

*To Die Dreaming* (2011) and *The Empty Plaza* (2012) foreground Havana's Plaza de la Revolución in a meditation on public space, revolutionary promise and memory. In the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring protests, Fusco questions why this square remains empty: what is lost with the institutionalization of the revolution? Also exhibited are several videos about repressed poets – Heberto Padilla (*La Confesión*, 2015), María Elena Cruz Varela (*The Message in a Bottle from María Elena*, 2015) and Reinaldo Arenas (*To Live in June with Your Tongue Hanging Out*, 2018) – along with the project *Confidencial: Autores Firmantes* (Confidential: Signing Authors, 2015).

## **The Agency of the Other**

During the years that Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña realized their well-known performance *The Couple in the Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* (1992–94), they encountered two responses to their personification of characters from the fictional island of Guatinau. While the mainstream public believed that the Guatinauans were actual natives, intellectuals and artists insisted on discussing the piece's moral implications rather than the work itself. What was meant to be a satirical commentary on concepts such as exoticism and primitivism proved to be a revealing exercise about the role of cultural institutions and the exhibition event as a producer of the notion of otherness. Also exhibited is the installation *Mexarcane International* (1994–95), a collaboration with Guillermo Gómez-Peña on the persistence of colonial fantasies in contemporary consumer culture.

Fusco has collaborated with the artist and performer Nao Bustamante to create actions addressing imaginaries of identity and gender. Included in the exhibition are *Stuff* (1996–99), a commentary on globalization, tourism and sexism, as well as *Paquita y Chata* (1996), a photographic version of the Mexican papier-mâché Lupita dolls that traditionally represented prostitutes.

## **Power and Prison**

*The Eternal Night* (2023) is screened in a bespoke cinematic space. Based on the testimony of the poet Néstor Díaz de Villegas, imprisoned in Cuba in the 1970s, it recreates life in prison and the power of the imagination to transcend it. Also presented is *Aponte's Lost Podcast* (2025), an installation produced for MACBA with the artist and activist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, who is currently serving a sentence in a prison in Guanajay. Fusco connects his banned drawings to the revolutionary drawings of José Antonio Aponte, an

Afro-Cuban activist who organised a slave rebellion in 1812. During the interrogation that preceded his execution, Aponte described the drawings that had been destroyed. 'To create the Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara project,' says Fusco, 'I recorded Otero Alcántara's descriptions of his drawings during a series of phone calls and sent those recordings to several of his artist friends.' Fusco asked them to adopt materials used by Cuban prisoners such as pens and cigarette packets.

In *Rights of Passage* (1997), made for the Johannesburg Biennale, Fusco created a checkpoint to access the enclosure, thus reflecting on the racist and discriminatory conditions of institutional power during apartheid.

### **Civil Disobedience and Direct Action**

The reenactment or reactivation of certain gestures and languages of power has been the subject of several of Fusco's works where she declares the futility of artistic practices that claim to exist outside a framework of institutional representation. Fusco manifests the need for the creation of new institutions and infrastructures that offer the conditions of possibility for an art that is critical of the system, operating within and outside of it.

This area addresses the ambivalence of that 'sanctuary' of freedom that once described the United States. A police infrastructure that denies civil rights to people deprived of their liberty and a dehumanizing order of individuals or specific groups are the subjects of projects such as *Bare Life Study #1* (2005), *Operation Atropos* (2006), *A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America* (2006-08), *a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert* and *Sightings* (2004).

The same racial and class stereotypes are behind performances such as *Eu Sou Um Consumidor* (I Am a Consumer, 2014), developed in a shopping mall in Rio de Janeiro, and *Your Eyes Will be an Empty Word* (2021), part of the MACBA Collection, which takes us to the Hart Island (New York) cemetery for indigent and unidentified individuals and those who died of aids and Covid-19.

### **Fusco Archive**

This documentation space archives Fusco's practice, which combines artistic research; the study of film language; narratives derived from literature, poetry and theoretical analysis; political satire; criticism and social justice projects. Also featured are three newly created works made in collaboration with Loid Der - *Environmental Activists Assassinated Worldwide* (2023), *Journalists Killed at Work Worldwide* (2023-24) and *Artists in Prison Worldwide* (2024) - which memorialize the names of imprisoned artists and murdered journalists and environmental activists.

### **Independent Cuban Film Series**

Every Wednesday in May, MACBA presents *Memory is a Landscape in Ruins*, curated by José Luís Aparicio, screenings of independent Cuban films that survey some of the

country's most critical themes. The selected films question the hegemony imposed for over sixty years on the Cuban national filmic imaginary, as well as the totalitarian control of history. A colloquium with the film directors and the curator of the series will conclude the program.

## **Opening Talk**

The exhibition opening on the afternoon of 22 May will be preceded by a conversation between the artist and the curator together with the poet Néstor Díaz de Villegas and the artist Sandra Ceballos, founder of Espacio Aglutinador.

## **New Issue of the MACBA Publication Series *3 XCGHUV2RUMMO***

To accompany the exhibition, MACBA has translated one of Fusco's most important essays, 'The Other History of Intercultural Performance', into Catalan, for the *Quaderns Portàtils* publication series. Here, the artist reviews the performance *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* while offering a comparative analysis between traditional ethnographic practices of displaying non-Western people and certain contemporary forms of encounter between Western audiences and racialized subjects. She also explores issues of identity, authenticity and representation in the context of recent intercultural exchanges. Fusco emphasizes that an interest in generating intercultural encounters – resulting in the production of the 'exotic' – is not unique to our times but was already present with the supposed 'discovery' of the Americas. Thus, the 'other' history of cultural performance that she narrates in this article refers to relational modes that were thought to have been overcome, the echo of which is still felt in any exchange determined by power relations, where some watch as others are consumed as exotic spectacle.

### **About**

### **Coco**

### **Fusco**

Coco Fusco is a Cuban-American writer and interdisciplinary artist. A significant part of her work has focused on themes of colonialism, power, race, gender and history. In her work she uses her own body, not only as a space of fusion, but also as its immediate product. Through performance she creates and inhabits multiple identities in order to destabilise those which have historically been imposed on bodies by colonial, racial and gender-based forces. She also engages with legacies of Cuban exile through Catholic rituals and experiences of displacement. Her works have been presented at the 56th Biennale di Venezia, the Whitney Biennial in New York, and the Sydney Biennial. More information at [coco Fusco.com](http://coco Fusco.com).

### **About Elvira Dyangani Ose**

Elvira Dyangani Ose has occupied the role of Director of the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) since September 2021. Previously, she was Director of The Showroom, London. She sits on the Advisory Council of Tate Modern and is a member of the Thought Council of the Fondazione Prada, where she has curated numerous projects, including:

Theaster Gates: True Value; Nástio Mosquito: T.T.T. Template Temples of Tenacity; and Betye Saar: Uneasy Dancer. Until the end of November 2018, she was Creative Time's Senior Curator, co-curating the 11th edition of the Summit entitled On Archipelagos and Other Imaginaries: Collective Strategies to Inhabit the World, among other projects.

Dyangani Ose was curator of the eighth Gothenburg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, (GIBCA 2015) and Curator of International Art at Tate Modern (2011–14). Previously, she was Curator at the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, and the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Seville, and Artistic Director of Rencontres Picha – Lubumbashi Biennial (2013). Multidisciplinary in nature, her curatorial projects address the narration of history as a collective experience, the way in which public space is intervened, and the recovery of non-Western narratives and epistemologies. They include: A Story Within a Story... (2015); Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist (2013); Across the Board (2012–14); Carrie Mae Weems: Social Studies (2010); Arte Invisible (2009, 2010); and Olvida Quien Soy/Erase Me From Who I Am (2006).

As a specialist in contemporary African art, she has taught seminars and participated in conferences about contemporary African artistic production and culture. She is a doctoral candidate in the History of Art and Visual Studies at Cornell University in New York. She holds a Diploma of Advanced Studies in the History and Theory of Architecture from the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya and a degree in History of Art from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Recently, she served as a visiting professor in Catalan Studies, an initiative organised by the Institut Ramón Llull and the Center for European and Mediterranean Studies (CEMS) at New York University.

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**Title:** *Coco Fusco. Learned to Swim on Dry Land.* **Opening:** 22 May, at 7.30 p.m. **MACBA dates:** from 23 May to 11 January 2026 **Production:** MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona in collaboration with El Museo del Barrio, New York, and supported by the Ford Foundation. **Curator:** Elvira Dyangani Ose

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■ <https://www.macba.cat/en/press/coco-fusco-i-learned-to-swim-on-dry-land/>